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AUTHOR Pagano, Alicia I.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines opportunities and challenges in early childhood teacher education in Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and the Gambia. It reviews socioeconomic and political issues, current and emerging policies for early childhood and primary education, teacher preparation strategies, and examples of successful programs. Information was collected during a 1997 sabbatical in the four countries. The researcher observed various urban and rural early childhood programs and met with government officials, directors of nongovernmental organizations, program directors, teachers, community leaders, and parents working in the field. Three sections examine: changing national contexts for early childhood education, a new global vision for early childhood education, and selected programs in the four countries. The four countries are each at crucial, pivotal moments in their national history. Challenges they face to provide care and education for their children are monumental at a time when new levels of education are essential for individual and national survival in the global society. They are faced with young, rapidly growing populations that need care and education to be productive future citizens. Rapid communication has brought information from other parts of the world, changing people's perspectives. This is all occurring at a time when poverty is increasing and finances for education and social services are inadequate. Despite this, opportunities for success are apparent in all four countries. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION IN FOUR WEST AFRICAN NATIONS: GHANA, MALI, SENEGAL, AND THE GAMBIA

by

Alicia I. Pagano, Ed.D., New Jersey City University, Jersey City, NJ

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AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION IN FOUR WEST AFRICAN NATIONS: GHANA, MALI, SENEGAL, AND THE GAMBIA

by Alicia I. Pagano, Ed.D., New Jersey City University

Introduction

"Humanity is immortal only thanks to children." (African proverb)

Early childhood education is a strong imperative for the Sub Saharan West African nations of Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia. With almost half of their populations under the age of 14, and with some of the fastest growing populations of any region in the world, the destiny of these nations weighs heavily on immediate actions to prepare their children with the essential knowledge and skills to successfully lead them into the future. Current indicators in both the external and internal environments present numerous opportunities to strengthen existing methods for early childhood care and education and to initiate new ones. However, there are also critical challenges to face in the process. This paper provides an overview of some of these opportunities and challenges through a review of socioeconomic and political issues, current and emerging policies for early childhood and primary education, teacher preparation strategies, and examples of successful programs in each country. Information for the basis of this paper was collected during my sabbatical in Ghana, Senegal, Mali, and The Gambia in the fall of 1997. During this time, I observed a variety of early childhood programs in both urban and rural settings in each of the countries. I met with government officials, directors of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), program directors, teachers, community leaders and parents working in various areas of child development and teacher education. Many people went out of their way to share their knowledge and expertise with me and to help me. I express my sincere gratitude and thanks to each of them.

Changing National Contexts for Early Childhood Education

"The baby is born to the mother, but the baby belongs to the family." (Wolof)

"A child is like a roof, it takes many hands to raise it." (Fulani)

These proverbs indicate the importance of children in the lives of West Africans. They also give a clue to some beliefs about the way children should be nurtured and taught. Children are very important to the family and to the total community. In many Western or Northern cultures, children are considered a "domestic responsibility." In West African countries, children are considered a "domestic resource." Traditionally, children have been brought up to recognize their interdependence and their responsibilities, according to their age, within the community. But traditional methods of preparing children to be successful are facing challenges in a society that is rapidly changing as national and global events impact on the everyday lives of citizens.

Africa has a long history of education going back to the scribes of ancient Egypt. Higher education centers such as those in Timbuktu and Jenne in Mali were equal to those in Europe and flourished into the precolonial period. According to history, schools were "natural organs connected in vital ways to African society" (Ki-Zerbo, 1988). However, during colonization, education was changed to meet the goals of the colonizers.

Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia have been independent nations for a relatively short period of time, with Ghana gaining independence from Great Britain in 1957, followed by Mali and Senegal from France in 1960, and The Gambia from Great Britain in 1965. Now education policies are initiated simultaneously with efforts to develop national concepts of democratic government. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all of the details on the road to democracy, but each nation has experienced periods of political turmoil, often resulting in a forceful takeover of the previous government. During this current decade, each country has either updated or developed a new constitution for governance seeking to build on the strengths of their historic traditions, constructing a bridge between their ancient pasts, their lives under colonialism, and the rapidly changing contexts of the present.

West Africa has one of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the world. Over 46% of the combined populations of Ghana, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia are under the age of 14 years. Approximately half of this young population is under 5 years of age. In contrast, in

France and the United Kingdom, 19% of the population is under the age of 14. In the United States, it's 22%. Accompanying the rapid growth of the population with its combined fertility rate of 5.7 (UNICEF, 1999), there is a major shift from rural to urban settings. Although a larger percent of the population in each of the four countries still reside in rural areas, there is a continuous migration towards urban areas as people look for work to sustain their families. An out-migration to other countries by young people of working age, especially young men, takes place. In addition, there are migrations throughout the region caused by civil strife. With these moves, there is an increasing breakdown of traditional family support structures accompanied by an increase in families with female heads-of-house, all of which impact the lives of young children.

Poverty, often extreme poverty, and the lack of clean water and sanitation are the greatest challenges to healthy child development in West Africa, greater than in any other region in the world. Poverty has increased in recent years, partially due to persistent and increasing drought conditions in sub-Saharan Africa. Also, market economics has increased the need for money as a basis for survival. Currently, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia are experiencing negative GNP per capita growth rates. The 1996 GNP per capita for Mali was $240; for The Gambia, $320; for Ghana, $360; and for Senegal, $570. This contrasts with $19,600 for the U.K, $26,270 for France and $28,020 for The United States. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund have provided loans, but money required to service these loans adds to the difficulties countries face (UNICEF, 1999). Debt relief requires economic restructuring which can mean a loss of much-needed social services. Since economic restructuring and the devaluing of the French Franc in 1994, people in Senegal and Mali have faced greater economic hardships. Similar hardships are noted in The Gambia and Ghana. In addition, issues of fiscal responsibility, have often been considered part of the forces leading to several military coups. One is reminded of the words of Alphonse Tey, "Poverty is a vice that can reach the imagination and become addictive, taking away the individual's capacity to even imagine solutions," (Guttman, 1988).

Modern communication, with the technologies of television and internet, are changing people's views of themselves and of the world. The internet and e-mail are available to the public in urban areas. Many small villages have access to television programming from Europe and the United

States. It is now possible to see a community of people seated around a television in a small village where there is no electricity or running water; the television is being operated by battery. In some remote areas, computers are operated by solar energy.

These situations, in the aggregate, appear to paint a very dismal picture for the next generation in West Africa, but times of challenge are also opportunities for change. Many people see Africa as a continent with great potential to provide a new paradigm for the future. One important source for optimism is the high value placed on children in households and communities in all of the countries. West Africans do not see their children as an obstacle to success, but rather as a strong source of energy for change. Children, to Africans are the "essence or sap of life." As they have in the past, West Africans look to their children as the hope for their futures.

New Global Vision for Early Childhood Education

"Human beings are born incomplete." (Bambara proverb)

New knowledge about the vital importance of the early years in a child's development is reaching a broader public, building mindfulness on many levels. Within the global context, international organizations are paying much more attention to very young children. Several events have helped to place the young child on the international agenda and encourage national initiatives. These include: The Convention on the Rights of the Child (approved November, 1989), The Summit for Children (September, 1990) and The World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand (March, 1990 and in 1993). The impact of these meetings, and the conclusions derived from them have stimulated international awareness to the importance of the early years of a child's life, have "marked a significant shift in the world's collective approach to education" (UNICEF, 1999). Of the 191 member nations at the United Nations, 189 have signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Only the United States and Somalia have not yet ratified the Convention. The Convention has also developed follow-up mechanisms for responding to the demands set forth in the Convention.

Today more organizations are looking beyond just health and nutrition issues or purely cognitive

programs to a recognition of the need for a holistic approach to early childhood development. In its first document of the Africa Region's Initiative on Early Childhood, the World Bank reported that "it sees child development, not as an extension of traditional schooling, but rather as the 'holistic' development of the child" (Colletta. Balachander, & Liang, 1996). A review of early childhood policy and programs in sub-Saharan Africa was published a year later describing eleven prototypical delivery systems in which "pivotal early childhood development services in health, nutrition and early education converge for mutual reinforcement and synergistic effect on the physical, cognitive and socioemotional development of children aged zero to six" (Colletta and Reinhold, 1997).

Ghana, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia, are designing policies for early childhood education that are based on a holistic approach to the child's development. Various programs operated by international, national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations, churches, and private entrepreneurs are in place. Although the programs vary according to local situations and local cultures, some generalities can be noted that are similar to those reported by Timyan at a conference in Abijan, Cote D'Ivoire in 1988. That is, whether the programs are rural or urban and whether they are designed and implemented by private entrepreneurs, local communities or NGOs, there is a knowledge that children are highly valued, children are the responsibility of the community, and that parental and community goals for children are centered around social and human values (Evans, 1980).

Selected Programs in Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia

Ghana

"It's at the end of the rope, that you begin to weave the new." (Ewe proverb)

Formal early childhood education in Ghana reaches back to the era when Europe was just beginning kindergartens. As early as 1843, the British Basel Mission attached kindergartens to the primary schools. Since then, some type of formal preschool education has been recognized in Ghana, but the expression of what, who, and how has changed depending on other issues in

government. The First Republic after independence passed the Education Act of 1961 in which preschools were listed under the category of "private schools." In 1977, the Commission for Education directed the establishment of kindergarten classes attached to primary schools.

The recent global focus on early childhood education has had a great impact on education in Ghana. In 1989, Ghana was the first nation to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Shortly after the 1990 Jomtien declaration on Education for All, the Ministry of Education, with the help of UNICEF, surveyed 200 early childhood programs to assess current needs for facilities, teachers, etc. Parents in the study named education as one of the three top priorities for their children, following food and health. With this information, a national seminar of early childhood development entitled The Child Cannot Wait, was held in the capital city of Accra in 1993. This seminar resulted in the Accra Declaration, which emphasized actions to make early childhood development more community-based in order to focus on the needs of poor children in rural areas, and to move Key issues for follow-up were linkages between home and school, accessibility to the poor, partnerships and cost-effective training. The Accra Declaration was a positive force to develop national policies for early childhood development.

Today, responsibilities for early childhood care and education fall under two ministries, namely, the Ghana Education Services (GES) and the Ministry of Social Welfare. The administration of nurseries for children 3 years old and of kindergarten for children 4-6 years old are under the GES. The Assistant Director for Early Childhood, who coordinates preschool activities, works under the Director of Basic Education. Creches and day care centers for children ages 2-6 are part of the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Because of the national policy of decentralization and the fiscal constraints of the current government, local communities are encouraged to establish their own childhood centers with professional guidance from the government.

The National Nursery Training Center (NNTC), established in Accra in 1965, provides training for nursery attendants and primary school teachers who want to specialize in early education. This is the only training center for early childhood educators in the nation. The curriculum has a holistic approach to child development and encourages students to create learning materials from

items in their local environments. The total program is six weeks in length. Three week courses during holidays accommodate persons who are employed and need to fit the program into their work schedules. The center trains 30-40 teachers at a time. A model nursery school is part of the NNTC, and students studying at the center observe and participate in these classes. There is no set time for parents to pick up their children from the center. Parents can come to take their children before the school day is ended. The Director said, "it is good for the child to be with the family." In Ghana, the family precedes the early childhood program in importance.

Many teachers in preschool programs are trained primary school teachers. The government has been paying their salary as if they were teaching in primary schools; but with a renewed emphasis on basic education, the government may withdraw them from the preschool programs to place them in primary schools. The NNTC has recently intensified training programs to help alleviate the problem of untrained early childhood teachers.

Currently, Ghana has approximately 6,000 public preschools and 2,000 private centers. The majority of these are in urban areas. Totally, they serve approximately 10% of the population from birth through age six. Most of the unserved are poor and are at-risk in health and education. One-half of the children from poor families never attend school. Often there is a lack of community awareness of the need for education, and staff in many programs are untrained. These are some of the problems Ghana is facing. Yet, within these constraints, the GES is steadily moving to develop a national policy for early childhood development.

While in Ghana, I stayed at the home of Mrs. Sara Opong, former Director of Basic Education and an early childhood consultant with the government and UNICEF. She prepared a well-balanced itinerary that included meetings at the national GES office where I observed national planning in action. She arranged visits to urban and rural preschool programs. Without her professional expertise and her untiring dedication to the field of early childhood development, I would not have had these opportunities. Below are examples of the programs I observed.

In the suburbs of Accra, I visited two private preschool/day care programs. At the Mizpah School, the 200 children ages 3-6 were from professional families who want their children to

have a "head start" in education. Most classes were in English because children spoke at least two languages at home. Although there was play equipment and time for play, as well as a lot of learning through action, there is no doubt that this program focused on "readiness" for school. The Director, who received her education at St. Reese's College and studied in England, started the center ten years ago. It has grown each year because of the expanding population. Now, she is preparing to add an elementary level because the competition for good elementary schools is high and parents send their children to preschools where they are certain to have access to an excellent primary education too. The Jezreel Montessori School was much smaller. It combined preschool and primary school with daycare and accepted children as young as 6 months of age. The Director has expertise in the Montessori method and she trains her own staff in these methods. She too, is planning an expansion because of the growing educational needs in Accra.

In the inner city of Accra, I visited two church-funded programs and two programs operated by NGOs. Most of the children in these schools came from families with lower incomes than those in private schools. The classes in the two church schools were taught in the local language with some English added to help acquaint children with English. The curriculum included traditional Ghanaian methods of learning such as role-playing, singing and movements that have a specific learning objective, and call-and-response activities. Because of a lack of materials, reading was primarily from the chalkboard or with centralized materials. The teachers were primary teachers who had been trained in early childhood at NNTC. Their salaries have been paid by the government. One of the NGO centers was sponsored by the 31st of December Women's Movement. This movement was inaugurated by the First Lady, Mrs. Rawlings, and was named after the day of the coup. his NGO promotes women's programs and sponsors early childhood centers throughout the country. The center I visited was located near the federal government offices and many children of government employees attended the center along with children from the local community. The teachers had been trained at the NNTC. The First Lady's interest in art was reflected in the curriculum and in the design of the play areas at the center.

The Konkomba Baby Care Project was an innovative day care program located at the edge of the large yam marketplace in the outskirts of Accra. The program was initiated for the children of young mothers, ages 18-25, who have come down from the northern part of the country to find

work carrying yams in the market. It was started by Catholic Action for Street Children. In the midst of overwhelming, adverse physical and financial conditions they are providing a safe and healthy environment for about 250 children ages eight months to five years. Mature women who have become too old to continue the heavy work as yam carriers have been trained at NNTC to be caregivers and teachers. Children are provided with the continuity of designated caregivers, health care, healthy food, clothing, and age-appropriate toys. The Project also provides counseling services and other forms of support for the young mothers who need to work; and, if perchance, they do not earn their basic earning requirement in their day's work, they must find a way to make up the difference. Often it is through "sex work" at night.

After visiting programs in the urban area around Accra, I traveled several hours up country to the Ossin Region While staying at the Foso Teacher Training Center where Ghanaian students are studying for certification to teach in elementary schools, I visited eight early childhood programs in nearby rural villages. In each village, I met with village education committees and parents, and then visited children and teachers in their classrooms. Parents told me, through the interpreter, that they are eager for their children to have the opportunity for an education. They give willingly from their own limited resources to help make this a reality. The community members have built the schools which are made of handmade bricks with metal roofs held by poles. The furniture consists of locally-made, wooden desks and chairs and mats for children to sit on. The teachers have few learning materials and children write with chalk on paper slates or their desks. In accordance with the decentralization program to encourage local communities to support their own schools, the community pays the teachers who have usually been trained in the NNTC.

Ghana's plans for the future are steadily progressing. The GES has developed a plan of action for 1998 in a document entitled *Proposed Guidelines for ECCD Development*. The guidelines include the preparation of a national policy statement, development of national curriculum guidelines, the expansion of training at the NNTC in Accra. and the establishment of training centers in each of the ten regions of the country. *A Guide for Educators of the Young Child*, covering the ages of birth through six years of age, has been prepared by the GES with assistance from UNICEF. This year, UNICEF is expanding its outreach to the rural areas of northern Ghana. All of these plans require sufficient funding which is still a major problem.

Mali

"Human beings are born incomplete." (Malian proverb)

Mali is a nation with a proud past. It is the cultural heir to three major African empires dating back over two millenniums. Today 73% of the population live in rural areas and 80% of the people are engaged in farming and fishing which has been increasingly difficult as the country is now 65% desert or semidesert with desertification continuously expanding. Mali is one of the poorest nations in the world. Approximately 31% of the people over the age of 15 can read, mostly men. Life expectancy is 48 years.

Immediately after independence from France in 1960, Mali focused its attention on secondary and higher education; so by the end of the 1980s, access to formal basic education in Mali was declining. However, today Mali is very interested in the education of its young people in spite of limited funds to carry out these endeavors. NGOs as well as the World Bank, France, USAID and other donors have made funds available to the education sector for the expansion and improvement of basic education. Mali is drafting a policy for early childhood development.

The major focus of my research in Mali was a program developed by Save the Children/USA in the southern region of Kolondieba. Peter Langharn, Regional Education Advisor for West Africa and Bakary Kieta, Director of Education for Save the Children/USA in Mali facilitated my journey to the Kolendieba District in Southern Mali where I observed community primary schools and an early childhood program in its formative stages. They willingly shared their professional knowledge with me, and without their expertise and assistance, my research in this area would have been impossible. The description of the Save the Children/USA project follows.

In 1990, Save the Children/USA began working with the Ministry of Education to help communities share the cost of school construction as planned under the national education project. In the government's model, three-classroom schools were to be built in rural communities at a cost of $30,000 each. Communities were to pay 25% of this. However, in the

Kolondieba district only two official schools were constructed in two years because the cost was too great for communities to pay their share. With the slow pace of expansion for access to primary education, different forms of community initiatives began to emerge. Save the Children/USA's model in Kolondieba was built on the premise that there was a demand for education in rural communities and that basic formal instruction could be provided with simple interventions. Through a partnership between Save the Children/USA and local communities on one hand, and Save the Children/USA, USAID and national education decision-makers on the other hand, a partnership for education developed that allowed community initiative and national policy-making to work in tandem.

This model recognizes the importance of community involvement at each step of the process. Villages confirm that they want a school and they select a village education committee. Then they recruit two teachers from the village and 30 students for each class. Equal numbers of boys and girls are selected. The requirement for girls to have parity is one of the strengths of the program. The candidates who are selected to be teachers are usually the people in the village who have the most formal education. This may mean a high school or college education or a fourth-grade education depending on the village. The village builds the school and Save the Children/USA pays for the roof, materials and training for the teachers. The village pays the teachers a salary of approximately $12.80 a month. Teacher training is carried out in a collaboration between Save the Children/USA and the Malian government's Institut Pedagogique National (IPN). Faculty at the Institut develop the teacher education curriculum which focuses on methodology specific to language and math skills acquisition. They provide an initial two-month preservice training in the district where the future teachers live and will work and later provide inservice training at regular intervals. Save the Children's educational staff visit the schools weekly to monitor the progress. The children's curriculum focuses on reading and writing and calculating skills in the first year and on knowledge of village life, health and work and enterprise in the second and third years. Classes are taught in Bambara, the local language, for the first two years. Then French is introduced. The fee for parents per student is approximately $.20 a month, depending on the community.

The village schools in Kolendieba are serving the basic educational needs of the country at 1/30

the cost of the earlier formal model. Because of the location of these schools, children are able to attend school in their own village rather than traveling long distances; education is perceived as relevant to village needs; teachers are directly responsible to the community; and parents feel that they have a say in how the school is organized and run. By 1995, 62 villages had schools with this model. Today there are over 800 schools. Research indicates that students pass national tests at the end of the third year at an equivalent level with those who have attended the government French schools. t demonstrates that effective teaching occurs with very minimal-qualified personal when the teachers are trained with a focus on methodology specific to language and math skills acquisition.

I visited a number of these schools in the rural and bush areas of the Kolondieba district and observed the students in their classes. Their motivation is very high and the communities are working hard to help their children. In one community, a big chalkboard was carefully placed outside under a nearby tree. Classes had been held outside on the day we arrived because the dirt floor of the school was being renewed. Water had been poured on the floor and that evening everyone was going to gather at the school. While the children tapped down the floor so it would be even and hard, they would be cheered on with singing, dancing and drumming as the whole community participated in keeping the school in good shape. The program requires that schools meet a certain number of hours, but the schedule fits in with the rhythm of the community.

With the growing national recognition of the importance of serving the needs of younger Malian children from ages birth through five, Mali has begun to address this population and the concept of "village schools" has now moved to "prescholaire" education. Save the Children/USA is working with rural communities to open preschools in a project called Strong Beginnings. The process for developing the program is similar to that for the primary schools. The curriculum takes into account existing child-rearing practices and beliefs of the Bambara families including a recognition of the importance of play.

I visited the first early childhood center in Foutiere, a village near the Ivory Coast. Foutiere villagers had completed the school building and were recruiting the teachers at that time. I saw

the village children playing in the shade near the new building. Then I met with the village chief, the education committee, and the parents under a tree in the center of the village to talk about why they wanted the preschool and the primary school for their children. In the Bambara style, everyone had an opportunity to voice their views. They told me that the world is changing. People are becoming too separated from each other. Their children need the school to maintain their social interactions and to develop the skills they need to be successful in their village and beyond. The mothers talked about the safety of their small children when they go to work in the cotton and millet fields. Young children face real dangers from snakes or from falling into cooking fires or wells. The preschool will provide a safe, positive environment for them. Since I have returned to the United States, the teachers have been trained according to the collaborative method for the primary schools, and the "mother groups" are meeting with the children.

While in Mali, I also visited an early childhood center in Kati, a village just outside of Bamako. This program was initiated by an NGO as a literacy program for women. As the program progressed, the women wanted care for their children while they studied. This was the beginning of day care. As the children grew, the parents wanted their children to continue in the program, so the preschool was added. The next year kindergarten was started; and, in the following years, grades one and two. Now, the program is well-established and serves a large community The staff has added computer education and film-making to the curriculum..

Senegal

"He who rejects his traditions may find himself being deceived by other traditions." (Wolof proverb)

Senegal, on the far most western coast of West Africa, is often known for its music and as an entry point into West Africa. At the gateway to the capital city of Dakar, lies Goree Island, a point of departure for slave ships in the era of slave trade. Two major universities are located in Senegal, one in the capital city of Dakar and one in St. Louis. Education is important in the Senegalese culture. In 1981, the goal of the nation's education project "ecole nouvelle" was to move schools out of their former colonial patterns toward a system with a more truly African

character, better adapted to current national development needs. Today, Senegal places its educational goals within the framework of the global initiatives of Education for All and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Along with other countries throughout the world, Senegal is recognizing the importance of focusing specific attention on early childhood. A national policy for early childhood education has been proposed and the government is beginning to implement the current draft. This draft decentralizes education at the preschool level so that communities are responsible for developing, training teachers, and carrying out the programs while the government holds responsibilities for setting standards and evaluating progress.

I visited several early childhood programs in the capital city of Dakar. The Croix Rouge Center was founded by the Red Cross, but today it is a self-sufficient private school serving children of professional families. The staff is trained and the curriculum is learner-centered. Children are engaged in age-appropriate activities that include small and large muscle development, pre-reading skills, and music. At the outskirts of Dakar, an international NGO operates a comprehensive center to meet the needs of poor families in the community of Hann. This center, sponsored by ORT, includes an early childhood program, health care for children as well as their parents, training for new teachers, and classes in nutrition as well as vocational training or retraining for members of the community.

The Senegalese NGO, TOSTAN (which means "breakthrough") has developed a program where training for early childhood development is directed at parents rather than teachers. TOSTAN. began several years ago implementing a literacy program in small, rural villages where almost 60% of Senegal's population lives. TOSTAN prepares their curriculum through a dialog with the villagers. Molly Melching, the initiator and Director of TOSTAN said, "we spent a lot of time talking about what people did already, what their problems and needs were." The villagers told her that their first priority was to have water. Their second priority was to read and write. In listening to villagers, TOSTAN develops programs that go hand-in-hand with improving living standards, thus providing an education that has immediate practical value. All of their educational materials are based on the idea that people have a vast store of knowledge which they have earned through different methods. As they think about what they are doing and

understand why they are doing it, they recognize skills that they did not realize they have. Through a series of 9 modules, each with 24 two-hour sessions, villagers learn problem solving, positive personal and village hygiene, basic health for children under five years of age, financial and material management, leadership skills, women's health, early childhood development, and the promotion of democracy and human rights in Senegal. All classes are taught from the perspective of human rights.

Although TOSTAN is not an early childhood organization per se, each of the modules has an important impact on the lives of young children. One, in particular provided new information for the early childhood development module which was initiated while I was there. This relates to female genital cutting (FGC). During the women's health module, which women requested prior to the module on early childhood development, women began to openly discuss issues related to FGC for the first time. They questioned the tradition and opened discussions with their husbands, neighbors, village and religious leaders and with neighboring villages. They brought it up again in the early childhood module. TOSTAN supported their dialog at every step. In January 1999, the government of Senegal passed legislation making FGC illegal. This has a direct affect on young girls who were circumcized as young as two years of age.

Several modules focus on health and nutrition issues of young children. However, the early childhood development module was the first to approach child development in a holistic manner. Molly Melching gave me the opportunity to be a participant in the facilitator's training for this module and made arrangements for me to visit one of the villages after the training was completed. I stayed in her home during this time. Without her direction and sharing of her expertise, I would not have been able to participate in this innovative program that impacts the lives of families and their young children in over 80 villages throughout Senegal.

The facilitators, who had been working with TOSTAN in an on-going basis and knew the teaching techniques employed by TOSTAN, met at a training center in Thies for two weeks to train in the early childhood module. Training was in Wolof and in Fulani, two of the major national languages in Senegal. The purpose of this training was to develop a shared knowledge-base and to build the strategies that they knew would work in the villages. Because the

facilitators were from the villages themselves, they knew the culture of their communities and could build on existing child-rearing practices. By building on the strengths of the culture, the TOSTAN program is in agreement with the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children have a right to their cultural identity.

The methodology employed by TOSTAN is interactive, building on the knowledge-base of the learners. I experienced this first-hand when I made my first visit to one of the classes which was already in session. The class was sitting in a circle in the open-air balcony of a training site, so Molly Melching and I sat at a table just outside of the circle on one side of the room. A lively discussion was in progress in Wolof. Molly leaned over to me and whispered, "which person is the teacher?" I paused briefly and then responded, "well, it could be that woman on the right or the man over on the left--or it might be the person on the far side of the room. I'm uncertain." "Wonderful," she responded. "If the class is going well, you should not be able to know who is the facilitator. Everyone should be involved with people teaching each other."

Because traditional childrearing practices are appropriate to promote healthy psychological development for the particular ecological and social context of a society (Timyan, 1988) TOSTAN builds on those practices to encourage parents and community members to reflect on what they see happening at various stages as a child develops. Questions such as, "What is a child doing? With whom? What are others doing with and for the child? Is there a better way to do this? Is there anything you would change? Why? How?" may lead to an evolution in current practices based on changes in life styles brought about by rapid changes in society or by new information. In this way, community members are empowered with their knowledge and they create partnerships to help sustain and enhance their child development practices.

A couple of weeks after the training, I visited one of the villages in which the early childhood development module was being taught, and observed some of the daily activities in the village. Rose, the facilitator in Ker Simbara, asked one of the village mothers if she could carry the mother's baby on her back as she showed me around the village. As the mother placed the baby on her back, Rose told me, "The baby wants to come to see the village with us. He will enjoy meeting everyone." I was reminded of the Wolof proverb, "The mother's back is a baby's

medicine." As we walked through the village, we met women drawing water from the well with young children playing near them. We visited with small groups of people of varying ages and the children followed the adults' examples in greeting us. We saw children helping women preparing food by taking turns with them to pound the ingredients in a large wooden bowl. These were concrete examples of one of the traditional patterns in the transmission of knowledge and responsibility; that is, that much learning occurs through modeling the behavior of adults and older children. We talked with a group of women working on a small business project while one of their babies was sitting safely in an innovative playpen--a plastic basin--so she would be nearby and part of the social setting, thus emphasizing the importance of sharing in the social activities. Everyone knew and greeted the teacher; and she had many opportunities to discuss early childhood development in the every day life of the village as well as in her more formal classes.

As members of the villages use the information and skills they have gained in TOSTAN's modules, they are enhancing their abilities to care for their children's needs and to provide them with activities that stimulate positive emotional and cognitive growth. They often share their new understandings with people from nearby villages becoming teachers themselves. What they have learned is reaching many others.

The Gambia

"A child learns by taking one step at a time, and with patience he will eventually get there." (African proverb)

The Gambia, the smallest of the West African nations, is located along both shores of The Gambia River and is surrounded on three sides by the nation of Senegal. In 1992, a military coup took place and recently, the leader of the coup, Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh, has been elected president. He, like the nation itself, is very young, and the country is undergoing numerous changes that address the current issues it faces. One of the major issues is economic. The Gambia is one of the poorest nations in the world. Although poverty is an insufficient way to describe any group of people, this condition effects everyone, especially young children. The

Gambia's highest import is food. It exports fish and ground nuts (peanuts); but, due to lack of rain, the size of the 1996-7 crop was 1/4 of the crop in 1990-91. The result was a lowering of national income.

The Gambia is rapidly growing in population, not only from one of the highest birth rates in Africa, but also because many immigrants are crossing Gambia's borders to escape civic strife in other countries. The population is rapidly shifting from rural areas to several major urban centers, changing traditional ways of life. Within the context of these national situations, The Gambian government realizes the urgent need to direct immediate attention on education in order to prepare citizens for participation in the future of the nation. Early childhood education is part of this. Like Ghanaians, Gambians realize that, "the child cannot wait."

Gabi Sosseh, a Gambian businessman and Adelaide Sosseh, a former Minister of Education arranged my schedule. I met with Madi O. Jatta, the Senior Education Officer in the Ministry of Education who provided information and current reports. Without their gracious, professional help, this segment of research would have been impossible.

In 1996, the Early Childhood Development Unit of the Ministry of Education commissioned a study funded by UNICEF to evaluate the day care centers in The Gambia in order to provide baseline references to formulate a national policy for early childhood development (Kanuteh, Arfang et al, 1996). The study, conducted on a sample of 40 early childhood centers within the ten regions of The Gambia, provided information about the types of centers, administration, staffing, physical facilities and equipment, parent and community support, children enrolled, and various aspects of the learning environment. Trends indicated that there had been a significant increase in the number of early childhood establishments and the number of children enrolled in them. According to the study, several factors contributed to these trends including the high rate of population growth and the fact that most mothers have to work outside of the home for longer periods of time to help support their families. Traditionally, young children accompanied their mothers or they were left in the care of older children, especially girls or with grandparents But numerous factors, including raising the primary school entry age to 8 years during the 1980s and a growing awareness by parents of the value of giving children an early start in education, have

led to a higher demand for early childhood programs. Within both urban and rural areas there were wide variations in programs as well as different methods for development and for oversight. Based on their findings, the research team made recommendations to the Ministry of Education for development of national policy.

The Policy on Early Childhood Development approved in draft form (Jatta, Nov 1997), is grounded in Gambian's philosophy of traditional values that "all are responsible for the education and development of young children--parents, families, and communities." The child's development is not in isolation of the total community, and all aspects of a child's learning environment are important. Programs for young children (from birth through ages six or seven) emphasize indigenous education and the use of local languages. They value actions to introduce young children into society and to prepare them for social responsibility, religious action, a moral life and the ability for political participation. The importance of using items in the child's environment as learning materials and the involvement of parents in the education of their children are both emphasized.

The Policy document also describes the procedures for initiating centers; the roles of the government, parents and community; the training of staff; and evaluations. Staff training is a strong component and the document outlines various routes to obtain this training. While current certification of day care center workers is awarded by attendance rather than assessment, the policy advises that there is a need to develop structures for preservice and inservice training of preschool teachers and administrators that will require more comprehensive assessment measures. Funding is the main inhibitor for implementation of the Policy on Early Childhood Development. To obtain the necessary finances, the support of NGOs is encouraged as well as local community initiatives. UNICEF has been one of the strong contributors to early child development and is continuing to participate in the development of training programs. The Gambia College will provide some of the training.

While in The Gambia, I visited two day care centers in urban settings and several early grades at one private school. Both of the day care centers focused on the care and well-being of the children while their parents were at work. The programs included singing, games, and hands-on

activities. At the primary school, children were involved in their academic studies. After observing them at work, each class sang several songs as an expression o f welcome to a visitor. One second grade class was preparing for a dress rehearsal of their annual Christmas performance which was to be video-taped later in the day. They enthusiastically gave an impromptu demonstration singing and acting out their memorized roles in the play.

Summary and Conclusions

"God's medicine for people is people." (Wolof proverb)

This paper has outlined some of the opportunities and challenges in areas of early childhood development and supportive teacher training programs in Ghana, Mali, Senegal and The Gambia, West Africa. Within the limits of the research on which this paper is based, it is impossible to generalize findings for each nation or for the region of West Africa as a whole. However, it is possible to draw some conclusions about current issues and emerging trends.

The data indicates that Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia are each at a crucial, pivotal moment in their national history. The challenges they face to provide care and education for their children are monumental at the very moment in history when it seems that new levels of education are essential both for individual and national survival in the global society. They are faced with a very young and rapidly growing population in which almost half of their citizens are under the age of 14 and in need of care and education so they will be able to be productive citizens in the near future. Because of rapid shifts in population from rural to urban areas and other accompanying changes, there is a loss of traditional means for caring for young children. Rapid communication has brought information from other parts of the world changing people's perspectives. These are all occurring at a time when poverty, with all of its dehabilitating circumstances, is increasing and finances for education and other social services are inadequate.

In spite of these major challenges, opportunities for success are apparent in all four countries. From an international perspective, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has promoted and supported early childhood education. Education has moved from a "need" to a "right" for all

people, with a recognition that education begins at birth. Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia have all ratified the Convention and are instituting government policies for early education. In this process, new collaborations between nongovernmental organizations, local communities and national governments are occurring. Innovative programs that support a holistic approach to early childhood development and new paradigms for training teachers and parents at minimal cost are gaining success. Indigenous language and culture are respected. Several examples are as follows. In Ghana, the National Nursery Training Program is training teachers and trainers who will go back to local communities to provide support. In Mali, communities are taking the lead in their children's education through a cost-effective model of local control, use of indigenous language in education, and multiple levels of collaboration developed by Save the Children/USA. In Senegal, the local NGO, TOSTAN, is developing education modules through dialog with community members and training facilitators by building on current knowledge and strengths of learners. In The Gambia, collaborations with NGOs such as UNICEF are producing a national agenda for early childhood education that is built on the traditions and languages of the people. In all of these programs, there is an enthusiasm and hope that comes from working collaboratively on a goal that has meaning for all and a strong belief that "it is the children who will make the future."

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